ONE NEIGHBOR'S OPINION · HOMELESSNESS · ASHEVILLE, NC

We Can Do Better *Than This*

I don't want us getting used to people sleeping outside, especially in winter. I believe we can change that, but only if we're willing to do something about it.

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Sources & notes (27 linked documents) · PDF version
The reporting behind this essay: How Asheville Can Get More People Home

12:30

Where I'm *standing*

Most weekdays, AHOPE closes at 1 p.m. Around 12:30, we start cleaning up, and the people who came in that morning gather their things and head back outside, into the weather. As I drive home, I know that many of them will remain outside, in the cold, until we reopen.

I started volunteering at AHOPE after Helene. Before that, I could go weeks without giving much thought to homelessness in Asheville. I saw it, of course, but I didn't really see it. Now that I know some of the people behind the numbers, I wish I'd paid attention sooner. I can't change that, but I can try and do something now.

THE RECORD

More people, fewer *answers*

On February 10, 2026, the **annual count** found 824 people experiencing homelessness in Buncombe County. Of those, 334 were **living outside**: on the street, in tents, in cars, or in other places no one should have to call home.

Helene certainly made things worse. But homelessness was a serious problem here long before the storm, and the number of people counted as homeless has continued to rise since then.

This isn't for lack of plans. In 2017, county commissioners supported a plan that anticipated effectively ending homelessness for people with the most complex needs by the end of that year. Another roadmap called for cutting the number of people living outside in half within two years. By May 2025, the mayor acknowledged that hadn't happened.

Now we have a plan running through 2028. It includes goals for shelter and housing-program use, but not yet a specific number for how many fewer people we intend to have sleeping outside. Those targets were supposed to come in annual plans. The second year began in July, and as of November 15, I haven't been able to find them.

I know people working in this field who care deeply and work hard. I see it at AHOPE. This isn't a criticism of their commitment or the work they do. But effort alone isn't the same as progress, and we've had enough plans that didn't deliver what they promised.

I'd like to know what's different this time. What number are we trying to reach? Who is responsible for reaching it? And how will we know whether we're getting there?

The **Continuum of Care** coordinates much of this work, and its board is responsible for progress. But the board doesn't control every agency, budget, or decision involved. That makes cooperation among the city, county, nonprofits, and service providers all the more important. Someone needs both the responsibility to get results and the support to make them possible.

THE MONEY

We're already *paying*

Whenever we talk about doing more, the first question is usually what it will cost. That's a fair question. But I think we also need to ask **what we're paying for now**.

People move between shelters, emergency rooms, jails, and the street. Those services cost money, and after all of it, someone can still end up right where they started, with nowhere to live. Our jail is taking care of people with serious mental-health needs, even though that isn't what a jail was built to do.

I wish I could say that providing housing would pay for itself. The research doesn't support such a simple promise. Studies in Denver and Canada found that housing and support reduced the use and cost of other services, but not enough to cover the full cost of the programs. Other studies have found larger savings. Results depend on the people being served, the cities, and how the programs are designed. This is why we can't point to a single plan and say "duplicate this."

So no, I don't think this will be free. I do think we should ask whether more of the money we already spend could help people get somewhere safe to live, and stay there.

I'd much rather see that money help someone close the door on a place of their own than pay for another trip through the same revolving door.

APRIL 30

What happens when the shelter beds *disappear?*

This is the question that worries me most as winter approaches.

The Salvation Army **announced** it would close its 65-bed, year-round shelter from November 1, 2026, through April 30, 2027, because of a funding shortage. Its local leader warned that the closure could become permanent if the money isn't found.

This winter, Homeward Bound is using that building for 90 **Code Purple** beds. ABCCM has another 35 at Transformation Village for women and children, and some overflow beds are available elsewhere. I'm grateful those beds exist. When the weather becomes dangerous, they can make an enormous difference.

But the two main sites together have 125 beds. That's far fewer than the 334 people counted outside in February. And Code Purple beds aren't open every night. The season ends April 30.

I keep coming back to the same questions: Where do people go on cold nights when Code Purple isn't called? Where will they sleep on May 1? What about those who can't get into a shelter because it is full? And if the Salvation Army's regular shelter never reopens, what happens to the people who depended on it?

We can't wait until April 30 to figure that out. By then, the answer needs to be in place.

THE NAMES

I've changed my mind about *a few things*

When I was much younger, I believed that life was a result of choices we made and that bad choices came with consequences.

I don't see it that way anymore.

I've met people whose lives don't fit into that tidy explanation, I don't know every story, and I don't pretend to. But I know enough now to understand that losing a home isn't always the result of one bad decision, and getting back into one isn't always something a person can do alone.

During bad weather, I sometimes think of those television commercials showing a dog shivering outdoors. I never wondered what that dog did to deserve being there. Yet I used to ask that sort of question about people. These days, I'm more interested in what it would take to get them inside and safe.

There is also a cost to waiting that doesn't show up neatly in a budget.

In December 2018, a memorial service at Haywood Street Congregation honored 22 people who were homeless or had previously been homeless and died that year. Their names were read aloud, and a candle was lit for each.

I tried to find a similar count for 2025 and couldn't. That doesn't mean no one died. It means I couldn't find a public accounting of the losses. I think those lives deserve to be remembered, too.

PROGRESS

Change is *possible*

I don't believe homelessness is something we simply have to accept.

Across the country, veteran homelessness **fell 56 percent** between 2010 and 2025. In Houston, **Governing** magazine reported in 2023 that encampments where about 600 people lived had been closed since 2021, with roughly 90 percent of those people placed in housing. There was pressure to leave, but more importantly, there was also housing available for them to move into.

Those examples don't mean we can copy another city's approach and expect the same results. They do show that the numbers can change when people make reducing homelessness a priority and follow through.

Here in Asheville, the new **Right at Home** initiative commits $6 million over three years to help at least 1,000 households avoid becoming homeless. That's encouraging. Preventing someone from losing a home is far better than trying to help them recover after they've lost it.

But prevention doesn't answer the question of what happens to people already sleeping outside. And we should be thinking now about how to sustain that work after the three years end.

THE ASK

Three things I'd like to *see*

I don't expect one organization or elected official to solve all of this. I do expect our community to agree on what we're trying to accomplish and be willing to tell the public whether it's working.

First, set a real target. Tell us how many fewer people we intend to have sleeping outside, and by when. Name who's responsible for making it happen. Make sure they have the cooperation, authority, and resources they need.

Second, show us the results. Every three months, report whether fewer people are entering homelessness programs, whether people are spending less time homeless, and whether people who find housing are able to keep it. Be honest about what those numbers can and can't tell us. Most important, tell us whether the work is succeeding. If it isn't, explain what will change.

Third, make sure there's somewhere safe to sleep every night. Decide now what happens when Code Purple isn't called and when its season ends on April 30. Tell us who's going to provide the beds and how they'll be funded.

Not every program has the same job. Some keep people safe tonight. Others help people find a home or keep the one they have. We need all of them, and we should judge each program by whether it's doing what it was meant to do. If it isn't, improve it or put the resources where they can do more good.

We need more homes people can afford. We need treatment that's available when people need it. Neither will happen overnight. But making sure someone has a safe place to sleep shouldn't have to wait years.

YOUR TURN

Will you step up *with me?*

I'm asking you to do one thing this week: **write** to a member of Asheville City Council or a Buncombe County commissioner. Ask three questions. What's our target for reducing the number of people sleeping outside? Who's responsible for meeting it? And where will people sleep on May 1?

If you don't get an answer, follow up. Ask again.

And if you can, support one of the **local organizations** doing this work. Give some time, make a donation, or ask what would be most useful. If you're already volunteering, thank you, and consider bringing a friend.

I came to this issue later than I wish I had. I'm still learning, and I don't have every answer. But I've seen enough to know that what we're doing isn't enough.

Tomorrow morning, AHOPE will open again at 8. I'll recognize many of the faces coming through the door. Every so often, someone stops coming, and I wonder if they're all right.

I hope they have found a safe place to call home, and I'd like us to do more to make that happen.

I believe we can do better than this. I hope you'll help.

Will YOU step up?

Every group in our directory is local, vetted, and doing this work right now. Pick one and back it. →

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